

5 Independent work placements as a gateway to the world of work

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1. Introduction

The Year Abroad (YA) is arguably the most valued feature of any languages degree, according to employers (British Academy & UCML, 2012). The resilience and problem-solving capacities developed by students who undertake a period of residence abroad are sought-after characteristics in the job market. Thus, most languages degrees in the UK include a YA as part of their programme of studies, and in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLC) at the University of Liverpool (UoL), students choose between studying at a partner university or working abroad.

This case study focuses on Independent Work Placements (IWP) and reflects on how a collaborative partnership between employers, universities and students provide a successful learning experience while guaranteeing a smoother transition from university to the world of work through the development of academic and soft skills.

Keywords: year abroad, independent work placement, transition, transferable skills, soft skills.

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2. What we did

At UoL, MLC students who undertake an IWP follow a well-structured pathway with the guidance of dedicated academic and administrative staff within the department and of an employability officer. They liaise to select and advertise vacancies, after assessing their suitability. Students can also propose placements that they will have independently secured. In order to enable them to find a suitable placement, they attend group and one-to-one coaching sessions, as well as workshops on CV and application writing and on interview preparation. Moreover, language modules guide them to apply the above-mentioned skills in a foreign language.

MLC have built long-standing relations with employers throughout Europe and Latin America. This varied pool often constitutes the starting point for students looking for placements. What makes the placements an ideal transition between University and work is that employers provide positions that balance support and responsibility, offering the students the opportunity to put theory into practice. IWPs are undertaken within the Erasmus+ framework in Europe and often with voluntary, and non-governmental organisations in Latin America.

“The university has great business contacts, so I managed to get a fantastic work placement for Siemens [...] which gave me a lot of practical skills” (JL, Business Studies and German).

From an academic perspective, students in IWPs are required to reflect on their practice and to work on an assessment that grants them credits for their programme of studies. They are assessed in the target language by a YA Project Essay (YAPE) – a systematic and coherent study of a cultural, historical, linguistic or literary theme – or a Portfolio – a logbook, plus a final report to reflect on development abroad (Allan & Driscoll, 2014).

“I really enjoyed writing my YAPE as I was able to link it to [my] work with victims of sexual trafficking. I gained a deeper understanding of the

severity of the crime in Nicaragua, which then enabled me to perform better within the workplace” (KH, German and Hispanic Studies).

There seems to be a common pattern shaping the experience of most students doing a work placement, which is not far away from the ‘W curve’ described in culture shock situations (UKCISA, 2013). After the initial ‘honeymoon stage’, some go through a phase when they are afraid or disappointed for varied reasons. These include the country and/or the job not meeting their expectations, as well as finding it hard to juggle work, study, and living abroad.

At this point, the role of the university is essential, as it provides a structured framework with constant support, at a logistic and pastoral level. This starts with the scrutiny and selection of jobs and continues for the whole duration of the experience. The role of supervisors and reflective portfolios are key tools to help the students understand the value of their placements as transition periods between study and work.

3. Discussion of outcomes

After initial adjustments, students come to terms with their situation and learn to enjoy and make the most of it. When looking back after their placements, they are often amazed at having been able to work in a foreign country, using a foreign language on a daily basis and having survived and enjoyed the new culture and society. During this time, students acquire a wide range of soft skills, which would have been otherwise developed in their first job, thus placing them at an advantaged point compared to other graduates.

“During my YA, I worked for a large multinational in Paris. [...] During interview processes since then [...] I could confidently talk about my work experience and put recruiters at ease, rather than persuading them to take me on by talent alone. The YA [...] meant I could hit the ground running when starting new jobs since then” (BO, Business Studies and French).

4. Conclusion

It can be argued that a close partnership between universities and employers enriches the students' experience and eases their transition from education into the world of work, making them better candidates for the job market. As a result of such feedback from our students and in response to an increasing demand from employers, an industry placement-based module will be offered from 2016-17 to students in the second year of languages degree. By adding the first supported work placement opportunity through local partners, we aim to extend our students' opportunities to benefit from a controlled entrance into the job market, at the same time as focusing on scaffolding such a transition.

As our student experiences show, IWPs prepare them for their first steps into professional life, shaping stronger personalities equipped with transferable skills, an international vision and an understanding of work ethics.

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